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SUBJECT: HUMAN RIGHTS SCENESETTER FOR STAFFDEL HOGREFE

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: Morocco is a country in the throes of change and reform, particularly with respect to human rights. King Mohammed VI has embarked on an ambitious and continuous program of human rights reform that includes greater political rights and participation by women, the Arab World's first truth commission, a revised family code, and growing electoral transparency and government accountability. Freedom of the press has expanded, but there are still some restrictions, and those who challenge them can suffer heavy fines, libel judgments and more rarely, jail. Political freedoms have grown as well, but divergence from the Government of Morocco's (GOM's) position on the Western Sahara, or questioning the legitimacy of monarchy or the Malekite rite of Sunni Islam, remain off limits. The observance of human rights by the Moroccan authorities in the Western Sahara is the same as in the rest of Morocco. Despite some setbacks, Morocco is a leader of reform in the region, and continued support and encouragement from partners like the United States is essential. End Summary.

Women's Rights

¶2. (SBU) Underscoring Morocco's regional leadership in this sphere, the King has made the advancement of women's rights a priority, calling it "the cornerstone" of Morocco's strategy of building a modern democratic society. As a result of support from the Palace and USAID, Morocco now has more elected women officials than any other Arab country and has dramatically increased the visibility of women as leaders and policy makers.

¶3. (SBU) Following an agreement between the GOM and the political parties, 12 percent of the seats (approximately 3,000 elected positions) in June's municipal council elections were reserved for women. More than 20,000 women ran for office, 20 percent of whom received campaign training from a Middle East Partnership Initiative- (MEPI-) sponsored project. Approximately 3,400 women won seats, a dozen of whom were later elected to chair local councils, making them mayors or mayor equivalents. Prior to the June elections, women held less than 0.5 percent of elected positions and only two women had served as mayors.

¶4. (SBU) The GOM has also enhanced legal protections for women, particularly through bold revisions to the Moudawana or family law code in 2004. In 2007, the King instituted training for women to act as spiritual guides, and they now represent more than one-fourth of Morocco's religious cadre. These female religious leaders help raise women's awareness of their rights, and promote a moderate, inclusive Islam.

Elections and Political Parties

15. (SBU) Despite the relative transparency of the June 12 communal elections, the subsequent intra-council election of city and communal council leaders (mayors) was, according to press reports, marred by interference by a political party and the Palace. The Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM) reportedly used extra-political pressure tactics, including invoking the name of King Mohammed VI, to pressure other parties into withdrawing from alliances with the Islamist-oriented Party of Justice and Development (PJD). Press reports charge that the Palace intervened in several areas to keep the PJD from controlling major cities, for example Casablanca and Tangier, while allowing them to run second-tier cities, such as Kenitra and Tetouan. According to press reports, Palace interference was most blatant in the city of Oujda, where the local governor blocked a vote that would have produced a PJD-lead coalition in late June. National Police, with complicity from the PAM, reportedly intimidated PJD coalition supporters and beat into a coma a local PJD leader, who has since recovered.

Religious Freedom

16. (SBU) The Moroccan Constitution provides for the freedom to practice one's religion, although Islam is the official state religion. The GOM prohibits distribution of non-Muslim religious materials and bans all proselytizing. It also occasionally restricts Islamic activities that it considers to have exceeded the bounds of "acceptable religious practice" and become "political in nature," as was the case with the crackdown on Shi'a activism this year. Morocco has become protective and even positive toward the tiny remnant of its once substantial Jewish minority, who now number 3,000) 4,000.

17. (SBU) In March, following its severing of relations with Iran, the Government launched an officially sanctioned pressure campaign against Shi'a in Morocco, seizing Shi'ite tracts from bookstores and libraries, and mobilizing imams to preach against Shi'ite influences. Approximately 15 leaders of Shi'a associations were questioned by police but then released without charges. The Ministry of National Education shut down a private Iraqi school following allegations that the school was teaching Shi'ite principles.

18. (SBU) In April, Moroccan authorities expelled five expatriate female Christian missionaries from the country for proselytizing and for their involvement in leading a regular women's Bible study group in Casablanca. The Moroccan women in the study group were taken to the local police station, then released without charges. The police were responding to an unrelated complaint from a neighbor and appear not to have been specifically targeting the meeting. This was the first time in more than four years that Morocco had publicly expelled missionaries.

Freedom of Expression

19. (SBU) Although Morocco has allowed increasing freedom of expression on many issues, divergence from the GOM's position on the Western Sahara or questioning the legitimacy of the monarchy or the Malekite rite of Sunni Islam remain off limits. On August 1, the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) seized editions of two influential weekly news magazines for publishing an opinion poll on the King's first decade in power, even though the poll in question showed 91 percent support for the King. The Ministry also banned import of an edition of French daily "Le Monde" that also published the results. To justify its action, the MOI cited Morocco's 1958 press code, which allows seizure of publications that violate public order or violate respect for the royal family or Islam. The Moroccan independent press has united in a strong

reaction against the Ministry's action. Morocco is in the process of reforming its press code, but the process has been slow.

Torture

¶10. (SBU) Morocco has sought to actively address past human rights abuses, including torture, with the goal of preventing future violence and restoring dignity to victims. Overall reported incidents of torture have decreased. However, there were some reports that security forces abused individuals, particularly during transport and pre-trial detention. Human rights NGOs have led the campaign against torture, recently creating a new group to monitor the country for torture practices, and to assist and rehabilitate victims. The Consultative Council for Human Rights (CCDH), a quasi-governmental body, serves as the official clearing house for complaints. The CCDH, along with NGOs, is lobbying for the ratification of the Optional Protocol on the UN Convention against Torture and encouraging government agencies to comply. Anti-torture reforms undertaken in 2006 criminalized abuse of prisoners and require an investigation of abuse when any prisoner exhibits injuries. Such reforms represent a step forward but have not been applied consistently.

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Issues

¶11. (SBU) According to gay rights activists, Morocco is more liberal than many of its neighbors on the issue of homosexuality, with increasing acceptance by the government and press. However, homosexuality continues to be illegal under the Moroccan penal code and may be punished by between 6 months and 3 years in prison, although this is rarely enforced. In March, a highly publicized gay rights campaign prompted a series of protests by Islamists, which triggered a limited but high-profile crackdown. Authorities arrested 17 men on suspicion of homosexuality, all of whom have since been released.

Western Sahara

¶12. (SBU) The human rights situation in the Western Sahara continues to stabilize, with a reduction in serious violations and some increases in political openness. Known police abusers have been transferred out of the territory and those left behind increasingly respect human rights standards. Harassment of some independence activists continue but appears limited to administrative difficulties, rather than physical abuse. In general, the observance of human rights by authorities in the Western Sahara is equivalent to that in the rest of Morocco.

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